



UIL Policy Brief 4

Community Matters: Fulfilling Learning Potentials for Young Men and Women

The global youth equity challenge

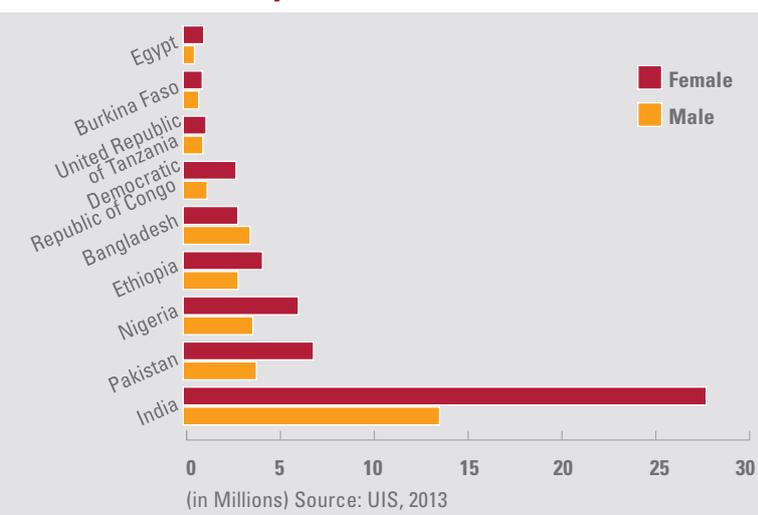
Close to 90 per cent of the world's youth (aged 15 to 24) live in developing countries. This provides both opportunities and challenges for development. While the youth today are more educated than their parents' generation, many young men and women in developing countries have missed the opportunity for basic education. The majority of the world's young illiterates live in South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (see diagram). This hampers their ability "to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions and to continue learning" (UNESCO 1990, Article I.1).

In some countries, the scale of the youth illiteracy problem calls for critical and targeted responses (UIS 2013, Table 5):

- 22 countries have more than one million illiterate young people.¹
- In eight sub-Saharan African countries, more than half of the young women are illiterate.²
- Reliable literacy data are not available in countries experiencing or recovering from conflict, but these countries are very likely to have large numbers of illiterate young men and women.³

Therefore, it is important to help young people in developing countries gain basic literacy skills so that they can contribute to the development of productive, peaceful and democratic societies.

70% of illiterate youth live in 9 countries (latest year available)



1 Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte-d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea, India, Iraq, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan and Tanzania.

2 Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Mali and Niger.

3 For example in South Sudan, the literacy rate for young women is estimated at around 28 per cent (Southern Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation 2011, p. 9).

Access to education is determined by many inter-related factors (gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, language, and distance from schools). For example, poor young women belonging to an ethnic minority and living in rural villages are far less likely to complete primary education than their peers in urban communities. In post-conflict situations, former child soldiers urgently need to catch up on the education they missed. For this reason, the impact of poor literacy and life skills is very clear, and calls for action by governments.

While national commitments and support are important, the diverse and complex contexts of young men and women require community-based solutions to providing and practising literacy and life skills.

International commitment to enhancing community education

Since the 1990s, UNESCO has promoted the establishment of community learning centres (CLCs) in the Asia region, believing that such venues which provide easy access to learners – especially out-of-school adolescents, youth and adults with no or low literacy skills – are crucial. This commitment was reinforced in 2009 when governmental and civil society representatives at UNESCO's Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) made a commitment to:

creating multi-purpose community learning spaces and centres and improving access to, and participation in, the full range of adult learning and education programmes. (UIL, 2010, p. 8)

Moreover, the Global Education First Initiative launched by the United Nations Secretary-General identified the provision of "alternative learning opportunities, including life skills, to all young people who have missed out on formal schooling" and cultivation of "a sense of community and active participation in giving back to society" as key actions to promote lifelong learning and foster global citizenship (United Nations, 2013).

The features of community learning centres

The community learning centres have the following features:

1. strong community ownership;
2. diverse learning provisions and
3. low costs to participate in learning activities.

A sense of ownership of the centres by community members is important in sustaining the activities and making them relevant to the concerns of the



Adolescent Girls' Club in South Sudan

community. Local people – leaders, school teachers and affected citizens – play active roles in the day-to-day management and organisation of the centres. Many of them work on a voluntary basis to serve the community, which may range in size from a village to a district. Staff are recruited locally so they know the people, their language, culture and living circumstances. The centres are located in key community venues, such as primary schools, village administration offices, places of worship, or in their own dedicated premises. Successful community learning centres are embedded in the community they serve.

The provision of a diverse range of learning activities allows community learning centres to reach out to the marginalised members of the community. The core functions of these centres are the provision of literacy courses to adults and non-formal education for children and young people who are out of school. They also support out-of-school children and youth in entering or returning to primary and secondary education. Responding to learners' demands for further learning, many centres also offer advanced literacy courses, continuing education, vocational training and other practical courses. The community learning centres mobilise learners, providing courses that are adapted to learners' schedules within a safe environment. When community leaders are dynamic and able to create synergies with government development schemes and non-governmental partners, the community learning centres become an active hub for learning activities. Many of these centres build a learning environment by incorporating a library, access to information technology and spaces for individual and group learning.

The community learning centres are known for the affordability of learning activities. Most of their literacy courses and learning opportunities are offered free of charge. Support to cover the salaries of adult educators or facilitators is usually provided by the government or international partners, often with some contributions from

the local community. Some centres also pursue income-generating activities, such as selling locally produced handicrafts and offering space and equipment for ceremonial events like weddings and funeral.

Through South-South cooperation, the concept and practices of community learning centres, though given diverse names in local languages, have expanded across the globe from Asia to countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States and Latin America. Some countries have learning centres specifically catering to youth; these tend to be located in urban areas. It is not common for youth to have a strong voice in the running of the community learning centres.

Good practice examples to engage young people in community learning centres

The following practices are drawn from secondary literature and the presentations and discussions held at the International Policy Forum on Literacy and Life Skills Education for Vulnerable Youth through Community Learning Centres, which was held in Jakarta, Indonesia in August 2013.

Although community learning centres are meant to serve everyone in the community, there is a need in many cases for them to be more youth-friendly. In contexts where there is acute need among young men and women for literacy and other basic skills, community learning centres could 1) mobilise them to participate in the centres' activities, 2) develop learning spaces, approaches and programmes tailored to their needs, and 3) provide them with responsible roles in the management of the centres.

It is not enough for community learning centres to provide literacy and life skills education for young men and women. The planning of teaching and learning processes should involve young people so that their specific literacy needs are addressed. In the **United Kingdom**, for example, a community centre designed a literacy project integrated with football training. This met the interests of urban boys and young men with low educational achievement exactly (Bradwell 2004).

Moreover, the centres need to explore how to engage young people in the planning, management and delivery of community learning services. Involvement in the centres' management activities also gives young people the opportunity to acquire practical experiences and to enhance their literacy and life skills. Many centres are already doing this. For example, young men and women offer computer courses or help in collecting and producing reading materials that are interesting for them and their peers.

A young woman in rural **Bangladesh** was a beneficiary of activities for children organised by a community learning centre when she was a girl. She is now an active member of this centre, running community action groups that prevent early marriage, and organising skills training courses. The centre has created space for youth to apply their skills and knowledge. With the support of a non-governmental organisation, she is planning to conduct youth leadership training to prepare young people like herself to take leadership roles in community development.

In **Indonesia**, young social entrepreneurs have taken the initiative to set up community learning centres. A young manager of a centre in central Jakarta has used wooden toy production and marketing to financially support the centre's activities, providing equivalency education programmes to out-of-school adolescents. A group of students has set up several centres equipped with ICT facilities that are providing internet access to rural communities.

Responding to growing numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training and are dependent on their parents, **Japan** is piloting a programme to help them become more independent. This pilot is carried out by the *kominkan* (community learning centres) in partnership with school, community and non-profit organisations.

The San Fan Project (meaning "weave a dream"), piloted by the government in **Thailand**, is providing second-chance access to lower secondary education through the integration of formal, non-formal and informal learning services. The young people study at school part-time, study autonomously in the public library and attend non-formal educational and community service activities organised by the community learning centres. One-to-one mentoring provided by non-formal education teachers in community learning centres gives special attention to young learners who otherwise might have left school.

The National Centre for Lifelong Education in **Mongolia** provides an online equivalency programme comprising 124 training modules and extending from primary to upper-secondary education as open educational resources. These online modules provide equivalency programmes to young nomadic people whose education was interrupted. The majority (76 per cent) of learners in Mongolia's Lifelong Learning Education *Gegeerel* Centres (community learning centres) at village level are young people aged 15 to 34. They are offered life skills training courses and equivalency programmes for primary and secondary education.

For community learning centres to be both sustainable and replicable, legal frameworks are needed for the centres and for their staff, as well



Ganokendra community action group on prevention of early marriage in Bangladesh

as long-term financial contributions by the government or partners to these centres. In **Indonesia**, national support for community learning centres has been given in the form of a presidential decree, umbrella initiatives and cross-ministerial coordination. At least three per cent of the annual education budget is dedicated to the financing of community learning centres. This has fostered innovative programmes and practices for young people throughout the country to receive non-formal and community education.

If countries have policies and guidelines on community learning centres, they should be reviewed with a view to involving youth in all stages of planning, management and delivery of services. Training opportunities to become community leaders and workers are needed so that young men and women can play greater roles in community learning centres. Further study is still needed on the collective impact of the community learning centres and ways of scaling them up to empower young men and women for the future.

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Title photo:
Handicraft training in PKBM Malacca in Indonesia